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SPEAKING IN CODE: OBTAINING BIPADS AND UPCs FOR YOU AND YOUR MAGAZINE

PICTURE IT. SICILY. 1923. An eager young publisher stands grasping the first issue of her long-awaited magazine. Everything appears perfect: a wonderful design that holds with tradition but is far enough out of the mainstream to be considered “edgy”; pithy and tempting cover lines; content that couldn’t be more relevant and necessary to contemporary conversation; a cover price that is not so low as to be undervaluing oneself yet high enough to send the message that you’re worth it; and the barcode? Sure, it’s right over the—well, it should be over there...I assumed it’d be, here? Maybe on the back?...

Before we go any further—do you get confused when trying to decipher what exactly is a UPC? Or a barcode? A bipad? Do they refer to different things or are they interchangeable, or what?

- A UPC is a 12-digit all-numeric code that identifies a magazine. There are many different kinds of UPCs but the one used for magazines in North America is the UPC-A type 2. This type consists of a manufacturer code, a five-digit item code (bipad), a check digit character and a tag-on, two-digit specific issue code that identifies the current issue.
- A barcode is an umbrella term under which UPC is found and since this is the only kind the magazine industry uses we can use barcode and UPC interchangeably.
- A bipad is a constant, five-digit number found at the end of a UPC that identifies your magazine, and is unique throughout the industry. Just like you.
- Also interchangeable are issue number and UPC. When referring to issue number, we will often call it the UPC as that is how it is invoiced in Magazines Canada’s system.

As a general rule, you will only need a barcode once you are distributed by a national distributor. Your national distributor can assign bipads and provide UPCs. Prices vary among distributors, but if you’re dealing with more than

one distributor it is recommended that you request your bipad and UPCs from your main distributor. At Magazines Canada, UPCs are available to members only, at \$20.00 each. The benefits of having your distributor provide you with a bipad and UPCs are:

1. Distributors are usually cheaper.
2. Distributors will work with you to ensure that the issue numbers you’re using are the correct ones.
3. Distributors can answer all those other questions you’d been meaning to ask about distribution. That’s multitasking.

If you do not have a national distributor then chances are your magazine isn’t yet on the newsstands that absolutely require a barcode and therefore having a barcode on your cover won’t be an issue. However, if this isn’t the case and you find yourself without a distributor but have newsstands demanding that you use a barcode before they carry your title (and you’ve got some money in the bank), there is a company in the U.S. called Bipad Inc., that works in conjunction with Harrington Associates and charges \$300 for a single bipad number. Please note that Bipad Inc. only provides the five-digit number. Yup, they’re selling numbers (!). How’s that for the free market run amok?

There is also a global organization called GS1 that provides bipad numbers and barcodes, but in addition to the initial cost of purchasing the code there is a yearly fee to keep the number. Visit the Canadian site at gs1ca.org.

Once you’ve got a bipad and know the issue/UPC number you’d like to use, you can purchase a barcode file to put onto your cover from FineLine Technologies, for \$50 per file. Turn-around time is usually two to three days depending on workload. In the States, there’s PIPS (Product Identification and Processing Systems). PIPS creates and sells UPCs for US\$30.

What is not recommended is choosing your own bipad at random. Chances are another magazine already owns it. You’ll get slapped with heavy labelling fees and then have to buy a new bipad number anyway. Stay honourable. Stay true. Stay you.

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